AN INVESTIGATION INTO INDIAN AND MÉTIS STUDENT LIFE EXPERIENCE IN SASKATCHEWAN SCHOOLS

Research Report
submitted by

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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION - THE NEED FOR A STUDENT VOICE IN ABORIGINAL RESEARCH ON EDUCATION

Education has been for several decades one of the most pressing issues for Canada's Aboriginal people. Between 1972, when the National Indian Brotherhood declared "Indian control of Indian education" to be the crucial factor in the struggle by Aboriginal people to regain their identity and establish an equitable footing in Canadian society, and more recent submissions to the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples which identified education as "the single most important issue facing Aboriginal people," much has changed even as many things have remained the same. First Nations have established control over innovative educational programs and institutions, new measures have been introduced to increase educational participation and attainment by Aboriginal people, and Aboriginal content has been integrated into or even become a central part of curricula and programs in many education systems. Nonetheless, further progress is needed to address serious problems on several fronts. Educational attainment among Aboriginal people remains well below comparable levels for the general population while school dropout rates are much higher, and uneasy relations are frequently cited between Aboriginal communities and the schools that serve them. The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996a: 5) emphasizes that Aboriginal people, in general, continue to experience serious economic marginalization and social disintegration in several respects, including high unemployment, low labour force participation, economic dependency, poor health, and high rates of incarceration. These problems are all the more serious in a public context in which education is increasingly looked to as a hallmark of social and economic success for the next millennium.

While these concerns have serious implications for Aboriginal people and the general population alike, they are most deeply felt by Aboriginal children and youth for whom progressive advances in educational, occupational and social opportunities are confronted by continuing barriers to their success. Paradoxically, despite the mounting body of research on

Aboriginal issues, much of which has finally begun to acknowledge repeated demands for representation and control by Aboriginal people themselves, little research has incorporated the voices of Indian and Métis children and youth. The study outlined in this report is a response to this concern by way of examining how young Aboriginal people view their schooling experiences in relation to other aspects of their lives.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

The project addresses the roles, perceptions, and experiences of Aboriginal students in Saskatchewan schools in relation to expectations and practices that occur both in and outside of school settings. The study has been organized in such a way as to give voice to Indian and Métis students, in order to determine how they assess their educational experiences, and how these perceptions are related to other aspects of their lives and to their expectations about their futures. Motivated by an Aboriginal perspective, the study adapts a holistic perspective which views education as an integral part of broader social experience.

The research focuses on three main research questions:

1. What factors do Indian and Métis students identify as the strengths and limitations of their schooling?

2. How relevant is schooling, according to the perceptions of Indian and Métis students, to their out-of-school experiences and aspirations?, and

3. What is the relationship between these student perceptions and various social factors in and out of school?

In order to address these research questions, research was conducted in the form of talking circles involving Indian and Métis students in selected elementary and secondary schools in Saskatchewan, and interviews with a sub-sample of students in those groups.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT

Saskatchewan has the highest concentration of Aboriginal people among Canadian provinces, estimated in 1996 to be 11.4 percent of the total population with a projected growth to 13.9 percent or higher by 2016 (Statistics Canada, 1998; Royal Commission on Aboriginal

Peoples, 1996b: 22). The proportion of children of Indian and Métis ancestry, which constituted

18 percent of the total provincial school population in 1991, is expected to grow to about 30

percent by 2006 (Saskatchewan Education, 1991: 5). It is projected that, among registered

Indians alone, current levels of entry into the province's labour force (estimated 1500 to 2000

young people annually) will continue at least through the next decade (Working Margins

Consulting Group, 1992: 5).

The changing demographic constitution of the province's population requires growing

sensitivity to several important sets of factors: (1) demands for educational programming and

services that will meet the diverse needs of pupils who are in or will soon be moving through the

school system; (2) public expectations that students will be adequately prepared for post-school

transition processes, through continuing or post-secondary educational institutions and into the

labour force.

The evidence to date suggests that, while a great deal more needs to be known about

how those demographic and transition processes operate, schools are doing a mixed job of

retaining and training Aboriginal children and youth. On the one hand, more Indian and Métis

pupils than ever before are enrolled in school and staying longer. Nationally, in 1996, 81.6

percent of the on-reserve registered Indian school-age population were attending school full-

time, about three-quarters of these pupils were staying in school continuously to the end of

grade 12, and post-secondary enrollment rates of registered Indians reached their highest-ever

levels (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1997: 33-37). In all of these regards, long-standing

gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations remain, although they have declined

from previous levels. Nonetheless, drop-out rates have continued to be high, and educational

achievements are well below levels that most observers consider to be satisfactory (Gabriel

Dumont Institute, 1993; Saskatchewan Treaty Indians, 1993; Mills Consulting, 1993). An

analysis conducted by the Working Margins Consulting Group (1992: 50) on Indian post-

secondary education and training in Saskatchewan observed, for instance, that deficiencies at

each successive level of education have produced shortfalls in the numbers of Indian and Métis

people who are available for higher education and training geared towards entry into highly skilled and professional occupations. The Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (1997: 87) cites the lower than average educational attainments by Aboriginal people in the province as a contributing factor to an "Aboriginal economic gap" characterized by unemployment, income deficiencies, and underutilized productivity.

Education also has a significance over and above socioeconomic advancement. It is important for shaping self-esteem, raising awareness and sensitivity towards one's own and other cultures, and contributing to the development of an educated, active citizenry able to foster the objectives of a democratic society. Consequently, there have been calls from several organizations for systematic research that will enable us to examine how educational processes currently operate for Aboriginal people in such a way as to either facilitate or restrict their educational progress. The Saskatchewan Indian and Métis Advisory Committee has advocated since 1984 a series of action plans intended to foster participation, curricular content and organizational practices that will make the school system more supportive and conducive to success for Aboriginal people (Saskatchewan Education, 1991), while the Saskatchewan Treaty Indians (1993: 7) have stressed the need for research and for "better, more integrated data systems to understand Indian participation in education within a total demographic context."

The research project outlined in this report is one of several projects sponsored by Saskatchewan Education in response to a series of research priorities identified by the Saskatchewan Indian and Métis Education Research Network composed of representatives from educational groups across the province. It is sensitive to the view, expressed by former Chief Ovide Mercredi of the Assembly of First Nations, and reiterated by many others in the context of the federal Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, that, "Native people have been studied to death." At the same time, there continues to be a pressing need for meaningful research that can incorporate the voices of Aboriginal community members in such a way as to contribute to effective social and economic change.

1.4 OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

In order to address the need identified in this chapter for research on Aboriginal students views of their educational experiences, the report outlines some of the major findings of previous research on Aboriginal education (Chapter 2) through an examination of the relationships among in-school factors, school organization and finance, and community factors. This is followed in Chapter 3 by a description of the methodology employed in our survey of Indian and Métis students in selected elementary and secondary schools in Saskatchewan. Chapter 4 presents the main research findings, concentrating on features of schooling that students consider to facilitate or impede their interest and achievement in education. Finally, Chapter 5 outlines the main conclusions and presents a number of important policy implications that follow from the research findings.

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

There is general consensus that, for Aboriginal people even more than for the general population, improved educational attainment is positively associated with the likelihood of labour market integration, greater employment prospects, increased earning potential, and reduced dependence on government transfer payments (Jankowski and Moazzami, 1995: 109-110; Santiago, 1997: 32). In this context, however, two major themes dominate the literature on the schooling experiences and probabilities of educational success or failure among Indian and Métis children. First, and most prominent, is the proliferation of studies that detail the dimensions of the longstanding gap between Aboriginal students and the general population with respect to educational attainment, school leaving and dropout rates, in-school problems, and associated socioeconomic concerns (see, e.g., Frideres, 1998; Satzewich and Wotherspoon, 1993; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996c). A second, growing body of literature describes a wide range of initiatives, including education and employment equity measures, cultural training, curriculum development and modification, and opportunities for greater involvement by Aboriginal people in diverse educational settings (Assembly of First Nations, 1988; Kirkness and Bowman, 1992; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996c). This combination of optimism and pessimism about the state of education for Aboriginal people is matched by mixed evidence about how successful these initiatives have been (Hamilton, 1991; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1993, 1996c; Mills Consulting, 1992, 1993).

Determinants of potential educational success or failure operate at several interdependent levels. One encouraging trend in the literature is the shift in focus away from a preoccupation to locate the source of educational problems within the individual students or Aboriginal cultures towards analysis of how social, organizational and policy arrangements have affected educational practices and outcomes (see especially Deyhle and Swisher, 1997, for a comprehensive review of the literature, albeit with an American focus). The most important of these considerations are outlined briefly below under the following headings - in-school factors,

educational governance and resources, and community factors. The discussion of the literature

concludes with the increasingly more prominent assessment that relations between schooling

and out of school cannot be understood independently of one another.

2.2 IN-SCHOOL FACTORS AS DETERMINANTS OF EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

The likelihood of educational success for Aboriginal students is affected by several

aspects of the schooling process. In common with all students, the ways in which children of

Aboriginal ancestry experience their relations with teachers, peers, school rules and procedures,

and subjects and curricula have a significant impact on their schooling careers and later lives.

Indian and Métis youth often face additional pressures to the extent that they are confronted with

racism, language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and school climates that they are

unfamiliar with or that may even be hostile to them. Some of the most important research

findings relevant to these issues are summarized in the next two sections which address,

respectively, teacher-student relations and curriculum issues.

2.2.1 TEACHERS, PEDAGOGIES AND ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

Educational researchers and members of Aboriginal communities have stressed

repeatedly both the need for, and educational benefits of having, teachers who understand

Aboriginal cultures and are sensitive to the specific needs of Indian and Métis learners. Stairs

(1995: 146-147) describes the role of teachers as "cultural brokers" who mediate between

Native and non-Native worlds through their selection and presentation of ideas, values,

knowledge, and interpersonal relationships. While it is not clear in the literature whether

Aboriginal teachers, in themselves, contribute to greater educational success among Aboriginal

students, the presence of teachers of Indian and Métis heritage fosters a sense of acceptance

and facilitates communication among the education system, students, and parents. Rather, a

critical factor is the degree to which teachers are sensitive to student backgrounds and cultural

differences, including possible differences in learning styles, and the extent to which they

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understand the problems and issues that students may bring with them into the classroom from outside school (Campbell, 1991: 109-110). Wilson (1994: 311-312) observes that even at the university level, Aboriginal students respond most favourably to instructors whose pedagogical approach is based on honest, caring interpersonal relationships rather than simply a professional orientation to strong instruction and accessibility.

Teachers, in these regards, must be able to adopt an integrated rather than a piecemeal approach to Aboriginal issues which requires a comprehensive knowledge of the meaning and nature of cultural practices among various First Nations traditions (Archibald, 1995: 352-353). Partly for these reasons, there are increasing demands for schools to hire more Aboriginal teachers and involve elders in educational programming. Their presence is important both symbolically, as a sign of openness and acceptance by the school system towards Indian and Métis communities, and in practical terms for the particular experiences and learnings that those teachers and elders may share with students, staff, and administrators (National Indian Brotherhood/Assembly of First Nations, 1988: 154). Consequently, further research is required to investigate the extent to which the longstanding under-representation of Indian and Métis teachers in provincial school systems has changed, the reasons why or why not, and what impact these circumstances have on students of Aboriginal ancestry.

2.2.2 ABORIGINAL CONTENT IN CURRICULA, MATERIALS AND PROGRAMMING

Curriculum issues lie at the heart of efforts to understand and improve the educational status and attainment of Aboriginal people. Despite improvements, two problems are prominent as recurrent themes in the literature. First, an absence of courses and content that incorporate Indian and Métis people and their histories, values and cultural practices in many schools perpetuates the gap that many Aboriginal people feel between the dominant culture and their own worlds. Second, Aboriginal people frequently reiterate concerns that an anti-Aboriginal bias remains in many school materials and pedagogical approaches (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1993: 20).

Some of these trends reveal the deep-rooted legacy of mistrust that has permeated Aboriginal people's relations with the school system following dispiriting or abusive experiences with the residential school system and marginalization within provincial school settings (Ryan, 1996). This history, combined with increasing public acknowledgment by policy-makers and educators of the necessity to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives and content into school processes, has perhaps contributed to disappointment when rising expectations do not match everyday experiences in the schools. Thus, for instance, Littlejohn and Fredeen (1993: 59, 78) report that only 61 of 327 schools they surveyed in Saskatchewan in the late 1980s indicated that they offered some form of Indian language training in their programs, and many of the Native language programs that did exist were jeopardized by inadequate funding and supporting resources. In a survey of Métis people in Saskatchewan, the Gabriel Dumont Institute (1993: 31) revealed that fewer than one-third of respondents reported that they had encountered Métis studies in either high school or elementary school, while fewer than two out of five had had any Aboriginal studies in elementary school and just under thirty percent were exposed to Aboriginal studies in high school. Boredom in general, often induced by irrelevant curricula, is frequently cited in the literature on school dropouts as a cause of early school leaving (Gilbert *et al*. 1993: 23; Tanner, Krahn and Hartnagel, 1995: 20-21). These problems are intensified among Aboriginal youth who see the school as unwelcoming and unreceptive to their own needs and perspectives, or for whom discontinuities between school expectations and their own cultural backgrounds create tensions and adjustment problems (Gabriel Dumont Institute, 1993: 25; Deyhle and Swisher, 1997: 162).

Research findings on curricular barriers are counterposed with studies that show the benefits of Aboriginal courses and content for Indian and Métis students. The mere inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives and material in the schooling process is a starting point to improve school retention and performance by Aboriginal students and to foster cross-cultural understanding. Nonetheless, simple exposure to curricula does not in itself guarantee that meaningful outcomes will be produced since curriculum is only one element of the total school

context or environment.

Cummins (1986: 21) argues that the extent to which students from minority backgrounds are either "disabled" or "empowered" through schooling is a consequence of the degree to which four institutional characteristics are incorporated into educational practices: minority languages and cultures; participation by community members; pedagogy that promotes active involvement on the part of minority students; and assessment measures that avoid viewing the source of problems experienced by minority students in the students themselves or in their cultures. Deyhle (1986: 386-387) argues, for instance, that testing processes that are presumed to be neutral indicators of student achievement in fact involve cultural processes that are incongruent with Aboriginal students' expectations and experiences.

By contrast, schools that report the greatest success in terms of retention and educational achievement among Indian and Métis students tend to be those that incorporate Aboriginal orientations across the entire range of curricular subjects, school programming, and educational activities (Kehoe and Echols, 1994: 62-63; Haig-Brown et al., 1997). This does not pertain only to schools within provincial systems. In a review of schools operated by First Nations, the National Indian Brotherhood/Assembly of First Nations (1988: 77) indicates that student learning is increased when holistic approaches are incorporated. Wilson (1994: 309) observes that Aboriginal students respond especially well to learning situations that promote "active experimentation," highlighting the value of direct experience more than abstract learning situations. More generally, Ryan (1996: 123) emphasizes the strong view among Aboriginal communities that curricular adaptations must be accompanied by more fundamental restructuring of educational structures and relationships in order to produce meaningful results.

2.3 EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE AND RESOURCES

The organization, administration and financing of education, although not direct contributors to learning outcomes, establish limitations and possibilities for what happens in and as a result of schooling. As with Aboriginal content within schooling, the presence of educational

administrators and school personnel who understand and are sympathetic to Aboriginal perspectives and concerns frequently emerges in the literature as a crucial factor that contributes to the enhancement of educational performance among Indian and Métis students (Mills Consulting, 1993: 19-20; Saskatchewan Education, 1991: 7; National Indian Brotherhood/Assembly of First Nations, 1988: 75-76). Arrangements that facilitate involvement of Indian and Métis parents in educational programming and decision-making, and the establishment of linkages between schools and communities, are central to these considerations.

Much of the recent analysis of educational governance and participation in decision-making has been oriented to clarification of what it means to achieve the longstanding First Nations objective of "Indian control of Indian education" (see, e.g., chapters in Battiste and Barman, 1995). While there is consensus over the importance of incorporating Aboriginal materials and perspectives into the curriculum, there is considerable debate over the meaning, nature and consequences of First Nations control over education. Positions that advocate the need for First Nations to have full, direct governance over education stand in contrast with views that favor modifications to provincial school systems or the formation of a variety of alternative educational systems. Ryan (1995: 225-226) suggests three alternative models (directed especially to post-secondary education but with application as well to elementary and secondary schooling) that should be considered as possible responses to ensure responsiveness to the learning concerns of Native students: the incorporation into mainstream schooling programs of compensatory measures for Aboriginal students who experience educational difficulties; the implementation of a range of alternative arrangements within school systems to provide flexibility in time and space in order to accommodate diverse student needs; and, the adoption of Aboriginal-controlled education systems built upon fundamental changes to educational structures and programming. Even where First Nations governance has been accomplished, there are considerable variations in the forms that such control takes, how it operates, and how effective it is (Hampton and Wolfson, 1994: 92-95; Paquette, 1989).

Analysis of these issues is not within the scope of the present study. However, given current and continuing realities in which an increasing number and range of education systems under Aboriginal authority coexist with growing numbers of Indian and Métis students in provincial schools, it is essential for researchers and policy-makers to investigate carefully how educational governance, educational processes, and educational outcomes affect one another. These questions become especially important in a context shaped by limited or declining school resources (Hylton, 1994: 44). As virtually all of the studies cited above point to, the process of adapting and delivering education in such a way as to improve retention, involvement and performance by Indian and Métis pupils tends to be a labour-intensive task that requires much more than superficial changes to discrete areas of educational practice.

2.4 COMMUNITY FACTORS

What happens in, and as a consequence of, schooling is shaped by more than strictly internal features of the education system. Schools must also acknowledge the impact of orientations, concerns and predispositions that educational participants bring with them into the school along with the community, political and socioeconomic environments in which the schools operate. For these reasons, a prominent theme in research and policy statements concerned with improving educational circumstances for Aboriginal people is apparent in demands for stronger cooperation between parents and schools, and increased involvement in the schools by parents, elders, and other community members. The cultivation of school-community relationships can contribute to open communication, mutual respect, and new understandings that may enhance the educational environment. It is equally important through these relationships for school personnel and schooling arrangements to foster a sensitivity to the realities and concerns that community members confront in their everyday experiences (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1993: 20, 23), as acknowledged in initiatives such as Saskatchewan's community schools policy (Saskatchewan Education, 1996: 6). There is a need for research into the effectiveness of the practices that emerge around these policies, although it

is recognized that considerable investments of time, resources and energies are required to implement them beyond their developmental stages. Nonetheless, as is evident in many of the research findings discussed above, educational outcomes and relationships tend to improve the more that schools demonstrate responsiveness to community and cultural concerns.

Effective educational practice, in these respects, requires an understanding of how socioeconomic conditions affect people at both individual and community levels. The absence of job opportunities in a community, for instance, may produce a disincentive for individuals to take an active interest in completing their schooling while it also increases the potential for poverty, crime, family breakdown, loss of infrastructural support services, and other serious concerns to become widespread. Migration out of or back to home communities and reserves as a result of parents' pursuit of work or educational opportunities mean that children may experience disruptions in learning and adjustment to new environments (Ryan, 1995: 223-224). These problems, in turn, affect learning practices and outcomes both directly and indirectly. Poverty, for instance, increases the risk of hunger and nutritional disorders, ill health, attention deficits, and repeated school absences, among other problems, that, in turn, contribute to lowered educational achievements and increased chances of dropping out of school (Hess, 1989: 5-7). Children whose parents have low levels of education and income are among the students most likely to leave school before graduation (Gilbert *et al.*, 1993: 23). Moreover, insofar as Aboriginal people continue to experience higher than average rates of poverty, unemployment, and similar socioeconomic problems, there is likely to be a perpetuation of negative stereotypes and racism that will further contribute to difficulties in achieving positive self-esteem and greater levels of educational and occupational success (Ponting, 1998: 280-282). At the same time, media attention and public concern about issues like youth crime, delinquency, alcohol and drug abuse, AIDS, and street culture have reinforced negative portrayals of youth, frequently targeting those of Aboriginal ancestry as marginalized and unfocused; these images divert attention away from an analysis of the sources of serious problems, thereby compounding them through an absence of effective interventions, services and solutions (Royal Commission on Aboriginal

Peoples, 1993: 40-42; Schissel, 1997).

Consideration of the problems cited above must be tempered with the recognition that Aboriginal people, like the general population, do not constitute a homogenous group. They live in diverse circumstances, shaped by history, region, gender, class, legal distinctions, and other factors (Satzewich and Wotherspoon, 1993). What this means for schooling and the analysis of educational issues is that acknowledgment of "difference," based on cultural and social factors, must consider how experiences differ within Aboriginal populations as well as between Aboriginal people and the general population. While a frank assessment of disruptive and often highly serious problems is necessary where these apply to specific individuals and communities, this cannot be to the detriment of recognizing that Aboriginal realities rarely match the stereotypical conceptions of them. As Kehoe and Echols (1994: 62) emphasize, a frequent finding in research that surveys Aboriginal parents reveals their commitment to widely held mainstream educational values like the desire for their children to perform well in school, to complete high school, and to be prepared for entry into the labour force, in addition to their more specific concerns to develop a sense of self-esteem and pride in their heritage. For Aboriginal children, like other students, school performance is enhanced by active parental support and encouragement to succeed, and is reinforced by facilitative services and environments.

2.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has presented an overview of some of the main findings of research and program assessment related to factors that facilitate or limit educational success among Indian and Métis people. There has been a tendency to move beyond approaches that isolate previous educational problems or failure in the individual learner or his/her culture, in order to situate educational practices and outcomes in a more general understanding of relations between schooling and the world beyond schools. Consequently, teachers, schools and educational programs that are receptive to the perspectives, contributions, and social circumstances of Aboriginal people are more likely to produce positive results than those that fail to acknowledge

these concerns. In this respect, the literature reveals that educational strategies that are effective in overcoming many of the educational gaps that remain between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are likely to be those that adopt an integrated approach. Curiously, despite movement to incorporate an Aboriginal presence into educational practice and research, the voices of Indian and Métis students have remained relatively silent in the analysis to date.

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

This research is based on interviews and talking circles with both elementary and secondary students of Aboriginal ancestry in the Province of Saskatchewan. The data are based on transcripts of talking circles and interviews conducted in both rural and urban areas in conventional elementary schools and alternative high schools under provincial jurisdiction. Given the mandate of this research program, band controlled and community schools are not part of the research. The tables and figures in this report are derived from the qualitative interviews and are based on information categorized from the transcripts incorporating themes identified in the literature review but open to additional areas of insight provided by the students. The interviews and talking circles were conducted by two research associates of Aboriginal ancestry and were guided by sensitivity to cultural traditions. The talking circles were conducted in conformity to culture tradition, with which both research associates have had prior experience. A more specific description of research protocol can be found in Appendix I.

The data focus on: (a) the cultural and educational context of the lives of the students; (b) the students' perceptions of their school experiences and their understandings of a better school system; (c) students' educational aspirations; and (d) the effect of cultural education on educational outcomes. We present findings for elementary and high school students together to give the reader some sense of how attitudes and orientations toward education may change across age and school systems.

The quantitative data are based on interviews with 65 elementary students in conventional schools and 25 high school students in alternative schools in Northern Saskatchewan and in Saskatoon. The three talking circles were conducted at an Alternative High School in Prince Albert and represented the contributions of 32 students, all of whom were Aboriginal--one of these was Inuit. The high school has approximately fifty students enrolled full-time.

In the original research program, we anticipated a larger sample of both elementary and

high school students. However, the researchers ran into considerable difficulty in gaining
access to many of the schools. The problems with access as well as some of the insights and
experiences of the researchers in this project are described in Appendix I.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

The first set of figures describes the cultural context in which students live. We focus here on issues of ancestry and language to help contextualize the cultural needs of the student respondents.

Figure 1.1 indicates the prevalence of spoken Aboriginal languages in the lives of the students.

FIG 1.1 DO YOU SPEAK AN ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE
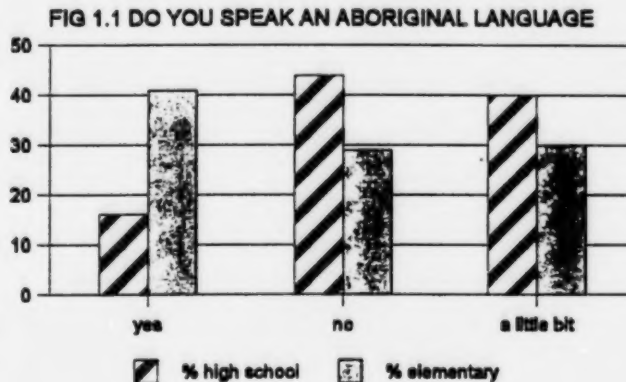
High school students report considerably lower levels of spoken Aboriginal language (17%) compared to elementary students, 40% of whom report being bilingual. Over 40% of high school students do not speak an Aboriginal language at all compared to less than 30% of elementary students. It is possible that we are seeing a generational phenomenon here in which ancestral language is becoming more important to Aboriginal people as they strive for identity and self-determination. Younger students are possibly deriving the benefits of this growing cultural focus more so than older students. Nonetheless, it is clear that a majority of all students speak an ancestral language, at least to some degree.

As a further indication of the importance and prevalence of language and culture, 82% of the elementary students and 100% of high school students indicate that an Aboriginal language is spoken at home by family members. The talking circles corroborate the importance of language. All students agree that their native tongue should be recognized as their first language and that they should be credited as bilingual inside and outside school. The students in general see the advantage of being bilingual as they feel that a Native language would allow them to work in a broad range of occupations related to Aboriginal people and that occupations based on traditional language use would permit the creation of more jobs for Aboriginal people, especially in the areas of health care, policing, and justice.

To get a general sense of the educational cultural context for the Aboriginal students in our research, we illustrate two rather fundamental issues--the number of Aboriginal teachers in the schools, and whether students like or dislike school in general.

FIG 1.2 SCHOOL CONTEXT
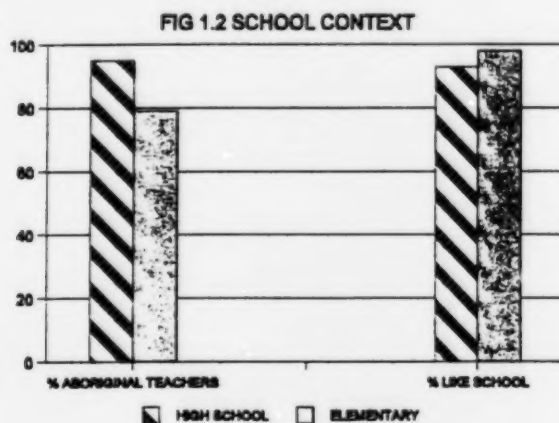
This figure is simple and yet remarkable in that it indicates that large percentages of both high school and elementary students are exposed to at least some Aboriginal teachers. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that for elementary students, 20% do not have any Aboriginal teachers. In terms of liking school, it is clear that at both levels, the vast majority of students like school, which is somewhat surprising and reason for considerable optimism.

To explore the degree to which students have access to culture, we asked the elementary students whether culture is taught in school.

FIG 1.3 WHETHER CULTURE IS TAUGHT IN SCHOOL

□ % of elementary students
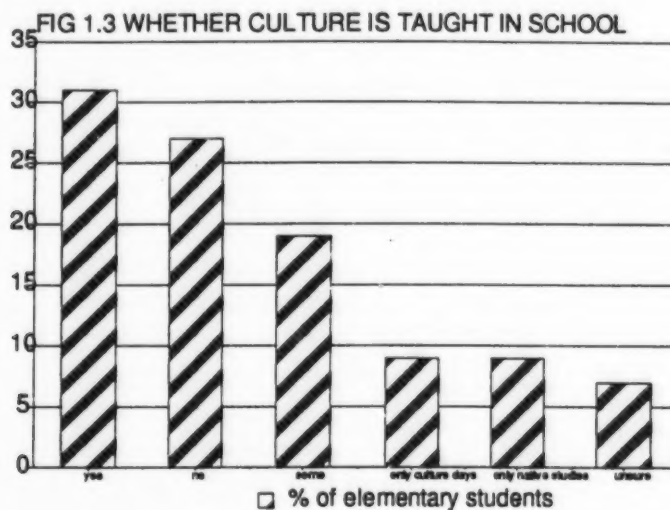
About 31 percent suggest that culture is taught, 27 percent respond never, while 19 percent respond some. Smaller percentages indicated that cultural teachings are limited to specific culture days or only in Native studies classes. In a similar vein, we asked the high school students the types of cultural education that they were offered in the alternative high schools.

FIG 1.4 TYPES OF CULTURAL EDUCATION IN HIGH SCHOOL

A bar chart titled "FIG 1.4 TYPES OF CULTURAL EDUCATION IN HIGH SCHOOL" with a y-axis from 0 to 40 and categories cree class (~40), native studies (~33), history (~13), spirituality (~13). Legend: % of students taking.
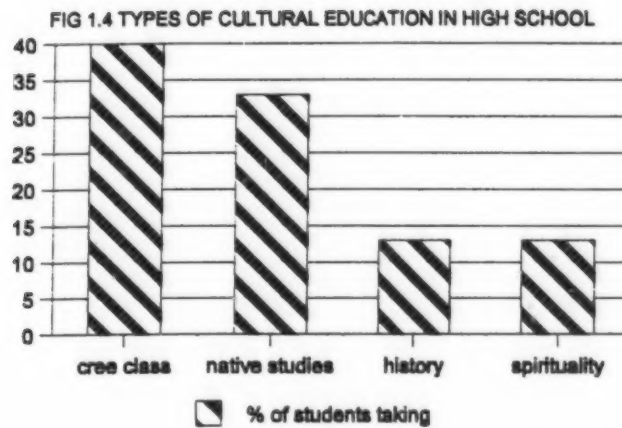
Quite clearly, a substantial proportion of all students are exposed to Cree language class, native studies classes, Aboriginal history and spirituality classes. We then asked the students to tell us the most important dimensions of cultural education.

FIG 1.5 IMPORTANT FORMS OF CULTURAL EDUCATION

A bar chart titled "FIG 1.5 IMPORTANT FORMS OF CULTURAL EDUCATION" with a y-axis from 0 to 70 and categories language (~65), ceremonies (~45), art (~10), history (~10). Legend: % high school indicating important.
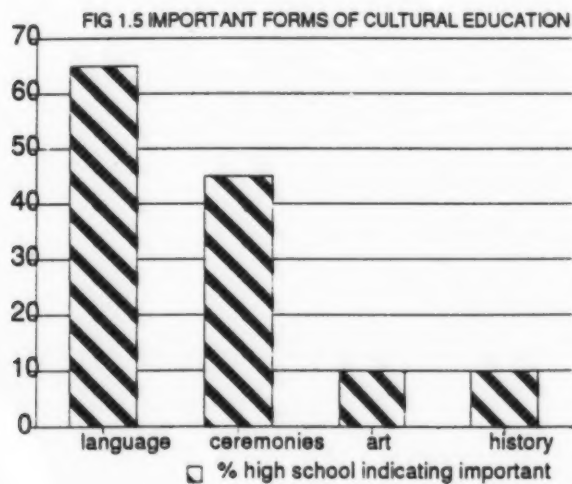
Clearly, language is central to the cultural and educational needs of these high school students (65%). The teaching of ceremonies is also substantially important (45%). Of less importance are classes in art and history. Overall, however, it is significant that students express a substantial demand for the teaching of language and ceremonies over and above that which they are currently receiving.
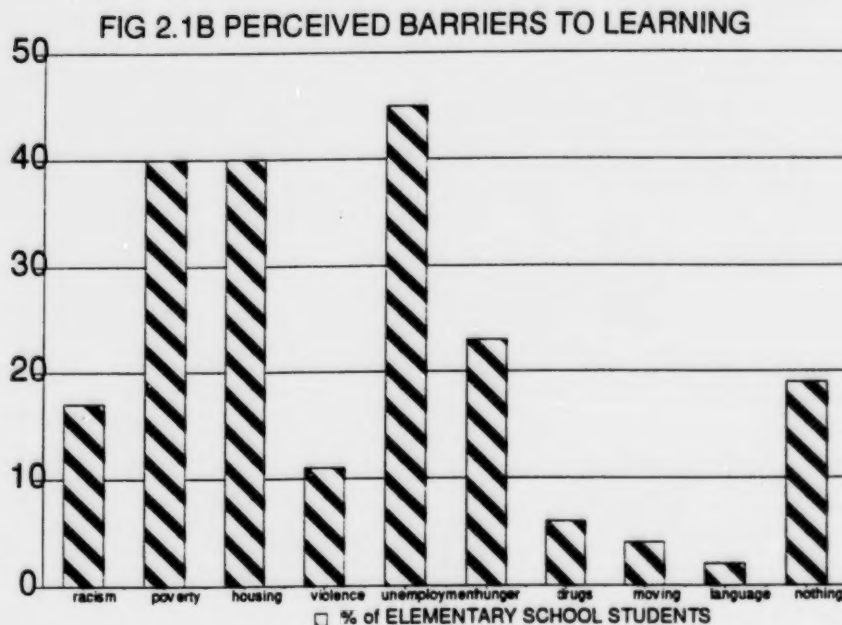
4.2 STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

The first set of graphs in this section present obviously important findings on students' understanding of what constitutes adequate and relevant education. Figures 2.1a and 2.1b illustrate what students perceive as barriers to their learning.

FIG 2.1A PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO LEARNING

racism   poverty   housing   violence   unemployment   teachers   drugs   one parent   fam probs   nothing

◣ % of HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

FIG 2.1B PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO LEARNING

□ % of ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS
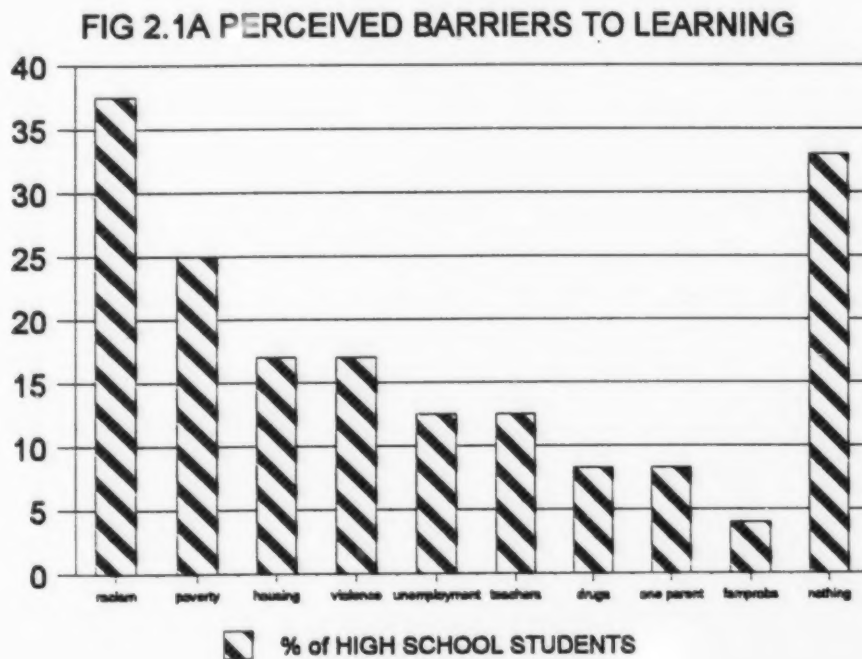
Quite clearly, racism is an ever-present problem for Aboriginal students, especially among those

in high school. More than thirty-five percent of the high school students rate this as the greatest

barrier to learning. One high school student stated, for example, that the main barrier to learning

for him and other Aboriginal students is "prejudice, people calling us dumb Indian and it

sticks with us mentally." Another student talked about a particular intolerant teacher as the main

reason she disliked being in school: "one was racist to me really bad, everybody knows that, all,

like everyone there knows that this teacher is racist against all Natives--because she's home-ec.

teacher. Like one out of four Native students would actually pass." One high school student

related a particularly poignant experience from his first year of school:

> My first day of kindergarten, I walked in to class, all the kids, it was story time, they
> moved to the other side of the room when I sat down, all the kids are on that side, and
> I'm thinking I didn't know the difference between white and Native--what is wrong with
> me? I went home and told my mom and that when she told me that I was Aboriginal, and
> I was like what is that? It was hard.

Interestingly, racism appears to be less a barrier for elementary students, who rate

unemployment, housing, poverty, and hunger as more important concerns. It is noteworthy that

high school students, too, rank socio-economic factors like poverty, housing, and unemployment
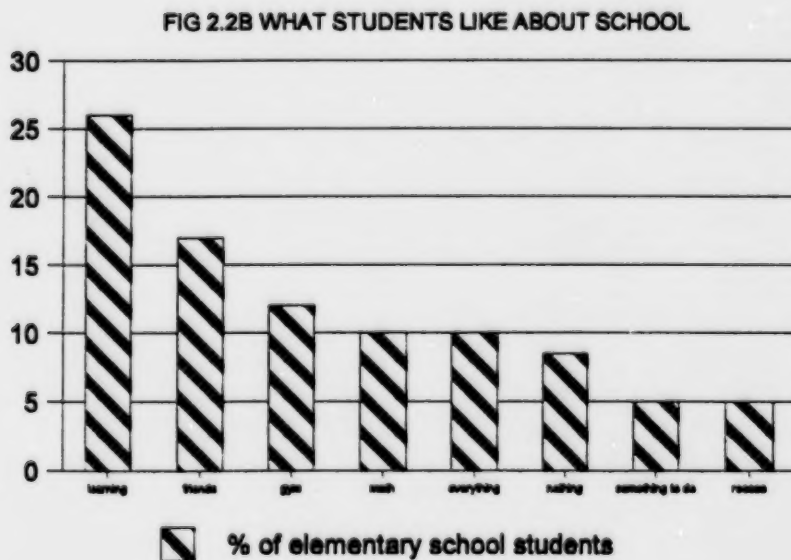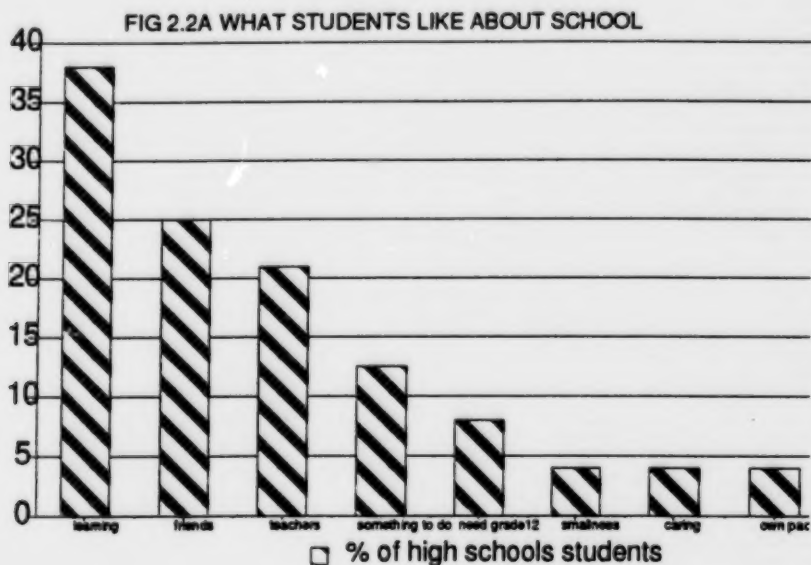
as significant in their lives. In addition, both groups of students raise issues of violence as a barrier to learning. Interestingly, family problems and drug use are less frequently cited by the Aboriginal students in our survey as central problems. Lastly, it is worth noting that a considerable percentage of high school students (33%) say that nothing stands in their way of learning compared to a much smaller proportion of elementary students (19%). About 12% of high school students, however, rate teachers as a barrier to learning as opposed to the elementary students who make no mention of this.

The talking circles revealed some interesting insights regarding barriers to education beyond those revealed in the interviews. A strong sense of individual self-determination was a consistent theme in the circles. The students collectively suggested that blaming outside forces- including historical forces, family members, and government--is not a constructive activity for them and that blaming stands in the way of understanding oneself. They consider collective blaming as a form of "misguidance." In addition, the students reveal that taking control of one's language is not only about cultural empowerment but also about personal enrichment. In this regard, they stress the importance of teaching by elders because language can be communicated by someone who has "walked the talk rather than from books."

Importantly, much like the interviews, the students in the talking circles reiterated how racism and discrimination fundamentally impede learning. The collective suggestion was that in conventional schools, teachers may not intend to discriminate, but their stereotypical views of Indian and Métis students prejudge ability and dedication.

Figures 2.2a and 2.2b illustrate what students like about school in general.

FIG 2.2A WHAT STUDENTS LIKE ABOUT SCHOOL

```
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
 5
 0
   learning  friends  teachers  something to do  need grade12  smallness  caring  oom pac
```

☐ % of high schools students

FIG 2.2B WHAT STUDENTS LIKE ABOUT SCHOOL

```
30
25
20
15
10
 5
 0
   learning  friends  gym  math  everything  nothing  something to do  recess
```

◩ % of elementary school students

For both high school and elementary students, it is clear that learning is the most enjoyable part of school and that friends are second. Interestingly, although high school students rate teachers

as the third most important part of school, elementary students make no mention of teachers, possibly indicating that teachers overall are taken for granted or have less importance for elementary than high school students. We may also be seeing the effect of alternative schools for high school students in that such schools make a concerted effort to engage the students in the decision making and interactive processes. It is also interesting that elementary students mention certain classes such as math and gym, recess, and high school students are more likely to mention the school context, again possibly reflecting the different philosophies and practices in alternative and regular classes.

When we asked high school students what they like about alternative school relative to conventional school, the responses illustrate the favorable context of alternative programs for high school students.

FIG 2.3 WHAT STUDENTS LIKE ABOUT ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

% of high school students
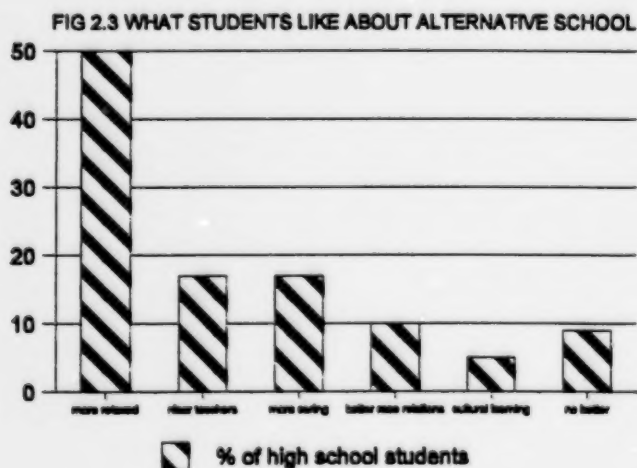
Fifty percent of the students indicate that they like the relaxed atmosphere of alternative schools. Further, they describe the context of the alternative programs by indicating their appreciation of nicer teachers, a more caring atmosphere, and better race relations and cultural learning. When asked specifically about the teachers, at least forty-five percent of students answer that they find teachers easy to talk to (Figure 2.4).

FIG 2.4 WHETHER IT IS EASY TO TALK TO TEACHERS

% of high school students
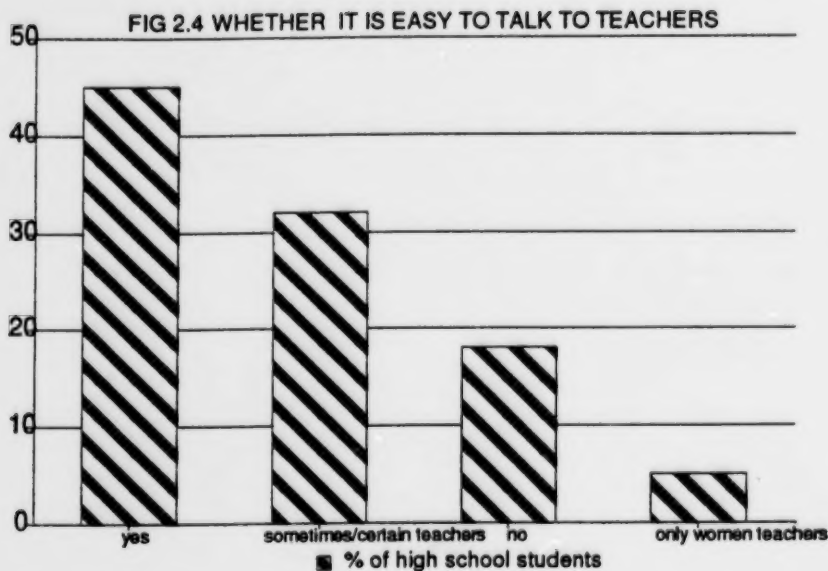
Another thirty percent indicate that sometimes certain teachers are easy to talk to. Only 18 percent indicate that they do not find it easy in some respect to talk to teachers.

The talking circles revealed that the alternative programs based on cultural teachings provide an important context for educational success. The discussions focused on how the "warm atmosphere" of the alternative programs (high school in this case) generate an enthusiasm for learning about culture, an enthusiasm for the pride of accomplishment and what this means for the students themselves as role models for brothers, sisters, and for the next generation, and an enthusiasm for reading in general. The students equate accomplishment in school as a tribute to elders and the importance of showing "respect for Elders and others who fought for the right to an education for us." The students also perceive very clearly that the route to their success is based on survival in a predominantly white world, "because living in a White culture, you need to learn White way to keep going to be able to survive."

The individual interviews revealed some powerful and informative anecdotes about alternative and conventional school systems. The issue of respect is central to the comments:

> What I liked was they gave us a lot of respect, they didn't treat us like a hut full of children, like in some schools I've noticed. They let us be ourselves. . .we were allowed to wear caps and everything in school. It's like, I really liked it."

Another student described the experience of mainstream school and what it meant to him: "Teachers are nicer here (alternative school), at the mainstream they are strict and mean. . . hollering and grabbing." This general experience with teachers led to this student dropping out of school in grade 7 for one year, for which the singular reason given was "the teacher being too mean."
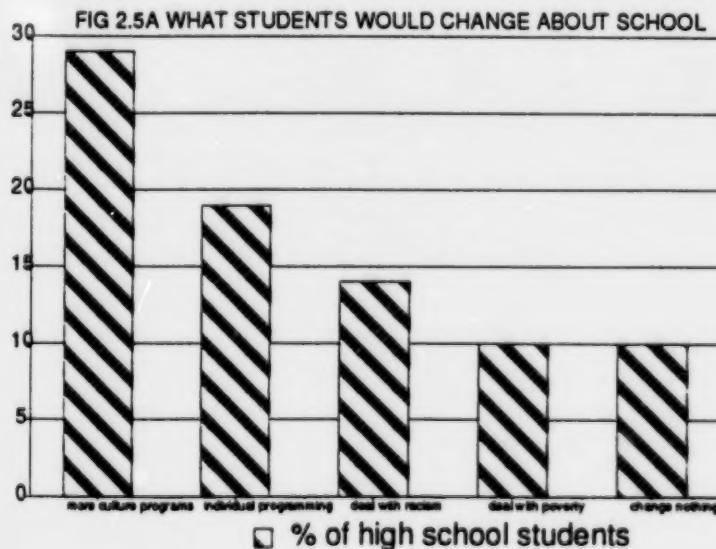
Several high school students reiterated their unequivocal appreciation for alternative programs:
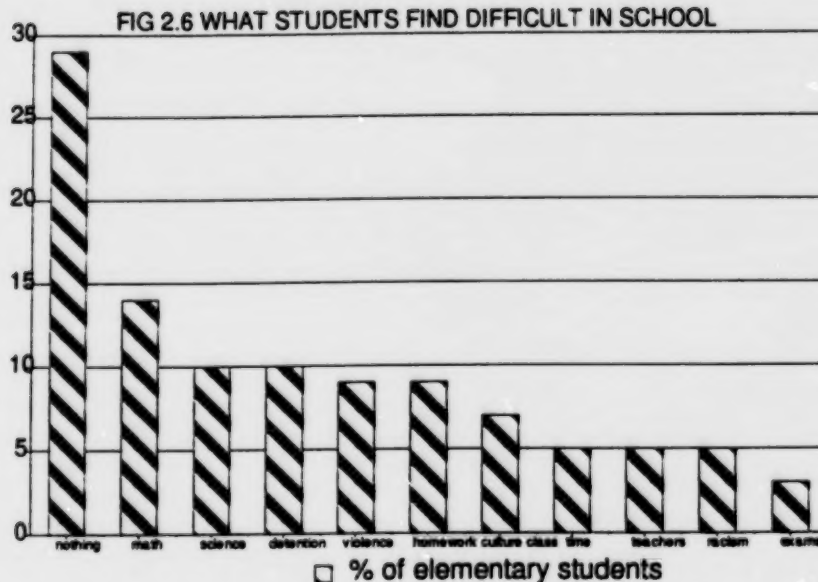
- I like the teachers and how nice they are. It's not just do your work, they take the time to help you. If the environment were more friendly in mainstream schools--more down to earth, more relaxed--it would be easier to learn.

- It's (mainstream school) very large and impersonal, a lot of groups really stick together and like maybe they are only friends with people they know. . .I like [alternative school] because it's small, caring, and I think, I'm friends with most all of the teachers and everybody, the closeness I guess, the friendship that's what really keeps a lot of people here and coming back. And plus, the teachers are great, they don't really make you feel like the whole teacher and student you know, almost buddies but not so.

- What I like about [alternative school] is the size, it's small and they have a lot of attention they can pay to students. I mean, in mainstream school you are a number, you are on an assembly line basically. Here they have like caring, touch, sensitivity.

In general, these remarks illustrate the relatively high satisfaction that high school students have with their alternative programs. They do have, as a result, a good deal to say about how to change the conventional school system.

FIG 2.5A WHAT STUDENTS WOULD CHANGE ABOUT SCHOOL

□ % of high school students

FIG 2.6 WHAT STUDENTS FIND DIFFICULT IN SCHOOL

□ % of elementary students

Interestingly, almost 30 percent of the students indicate that they would change nothing about school. With respect to the school curriculum, however, students indicate difficulty with math and science and culture class, respectively. As evidenced from previous findings, racism and violence are mentioned as troublesome for some elementary students. As somewhat expected, these young students also express difficulty with homework, exams, teachers, and time management. Overall, then, the difficulties elementary students have in school range from particular subjects to socio-cultural issues like racism and violence.

Within the high school talking circles, the students revealed awareness of the importance of Aboriginal self-determination in education at both a governance and personal level:

> a long time ago we did not have what we have now so therefore we are now respected for what we are doing, it is up to Aboriginal people to educate ourselves to get what we want and to be who we are. What is taught in the present school system is one-sided to an extent - i.e. in the 1980s, five Aboriginal people were at school based on English and French. So, Aboriginal people refused to learn French because it discriminated against Aboriginal people. It is up to Aboriginal people to force changes to be made.

In addition, the students reiterated the need for teachers of Aboriginal ancestry and experience. Further they expressed the sentiment (and this was a theme that ran through many of the

discussions) that students need greater input into their education with respect to where to go to school, what to take, and the speed at which they need to complete school. The students also suggested that regular schools and alternative programs must allow flexibility to encourage older students to attend. Their collective perception was that schools that had a mix of adult and adolescent students were more comfortable, more democratic and safer.

The following transcript illustrates another dimension of education that goes often unexpressed possibly because it is considered less of an education issue rather than one of social welfare. However, the immediacy of the issue to education is expressed by a female high school student:

> [There should be] classes to teach young people what abusive relationships are, who you can turn to, how you can get out of it because a lot of times a lot of people in them or who have gone through them say 'well we got this together or he got me this and they (abuser) usually give money to get their foot back in the door and it usually works.'

Lastly, the students expressed in the talking circles the importance of language to their overall education. They suggested that when their traditional language is devalued by the school system, elementary students especially develop a distaste for learning all languages.

4.3 EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

We asked both elementary and high school students about their plans to attend post secondary educational institutions. Figure 3.1 illustrates the results for both types of students.

FIG 3.1 PLANS TO ATTEND POST SECONDARY

% high school
% elementary
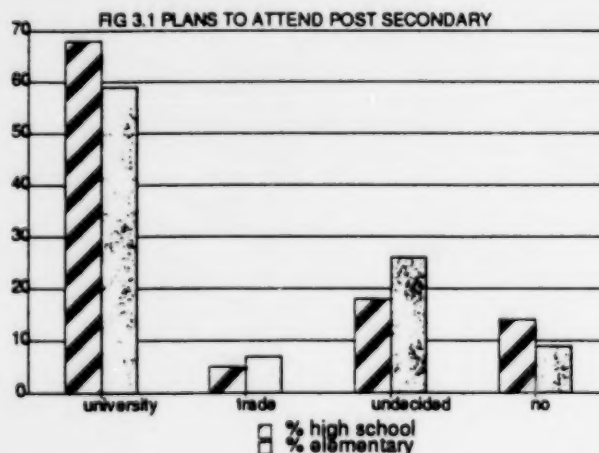
Quite clearly, for students at both levels, the vast majority wish to go to University. The high school group is most noticeable in that almost 70% percent of the students in the alternative programs aspire to university education. Only around 10 percent of both groups of students does not want to continue with education. These findings indicate a strong commitment to further education and a remarkable resolution to attend University.

We asked all the students to indicate, as well, the types of careers they wish to pursue. The variation in responses was understandably wide. The focus, however, seemed to be on professional occupations that demand substantial training. These results follow quite logically from students' high educational aspirations. The typical careers indicated by high school students include doctor/nurse, lawyer, teacher, business owner, and engineer. Several other more unusual occupations include sports and recreation, social work, and police/firefighter. These occupations are all highly relevant to the social and economic needs of the communities and are indicative of a commitment to the local communities. Elementary students indicate similar occupations with some additional occupations including computers, veterinarian, and mine operator. Overall, it is interesting that both elementary and high school students aspire to occupations that demand a good deal of training and dedication and are occupations that are relevant to their communities. Secondly, it is significant that very few students (none in high school and only ten in elementary) indicate that they do not know what they want to be. Obviously, most of the students, despite age, do have a focus in that they have given a good deal of consideration to their career plans..

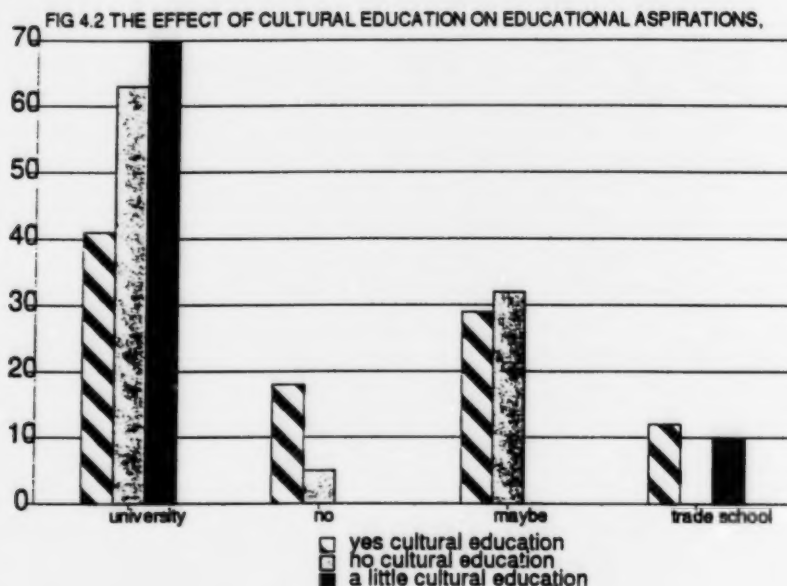## 4.4 THE EFFECT OF CULTURAL EDUCATION ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

In this section we relate the prevalence of cultural education programs to the satisfaction which students feel in school, their aspirations and dropout rates. Figure 4.1 presents the results for whether elementary students like school based on whether they receive cultural education in school.

Figure 4.1 EFFECT OF CULTURAL EDUCATION ON HOW ELEMENTARY STUDENTS LIKE SCHOOL
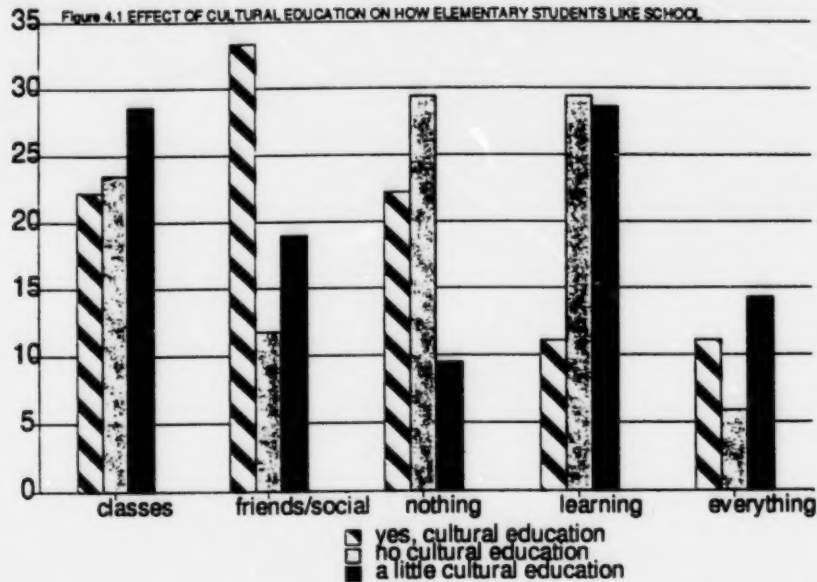
Most noticeably here are the results for students who like everything about school. Eleven percent of the students who receive cultural education and 14% who receive a little cultural education indicate that they like everything about school compared to only 6 % who receive no cultural education. Similarly, approximately 30% of the students who receive no cultural education like nothing about school compared to those in the two categories that do experience some cultural learning for which 22% (yes) and 9.5% (a little) of the students like nothing about school. Interestingly, as well, the students who like the friendship and social aspects of school are primarily those who receive cultural teaching (33% compared to 12% who do not). Lastly, it is worth noting that the level of cultural education has little impact on whether students like classes but it is related to whether students like learning. In this case, it appears that students who receive little or no cultural training in school like the learning aspect of school the most.

One of the anomalous findings to this point is found in Figure 4.2.

FIG 4.2 THE EFFECT OF CULTURAL EDUCATION ON EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS,

A bar chart with y-axis from 0 to 70 in increments of 10, and x-axis categories: university, no, maybe, trade school.

Legend:
- yes cultural education
- no cultural education
- a little cultural education

Here we find that cultural education is associated with less interest in University and some indecisiveness regarding future education plans for elementary students. For example, approximately 40% of those enroled in cultural education in school desire to go to University compared to 62% not enroled and 70% with little exposure to cultural training. In turn, more students with some or little cultural training indicate they want to go to technical school compared to those with no cultural education. In part, the explanation for this apparent anomaly is that elementary students may not have had the chance or may not have the will to think about educational aspirations as much as their high school counterparts. However, it may be that cultural programs, by virtue of their more general orientation, tend not to focus student aspirations on traditional transition patterns.
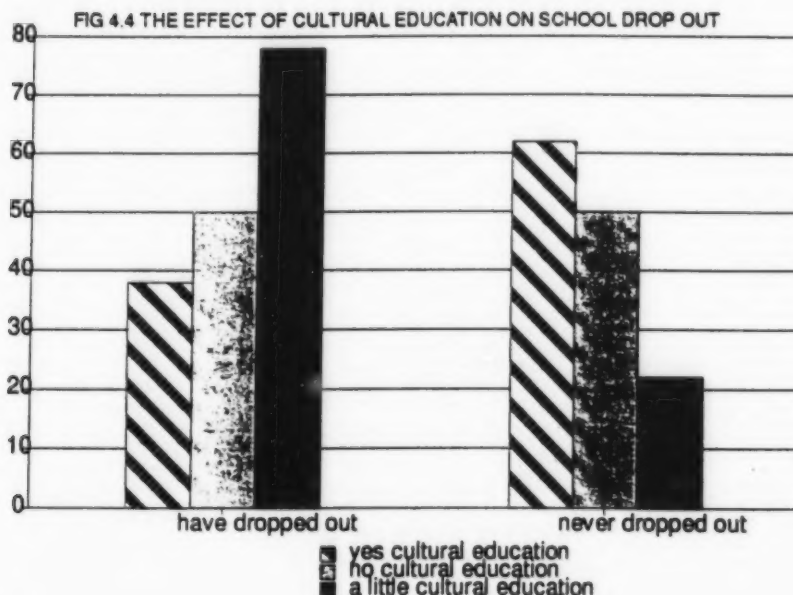
For high school, the results indicate a different pattern of association (Figure 4.3).

FIG 4.3 EFFECT OF CULTURAL EDUCATION ON EDUCATION ASPIRATIONS

yes cultural education
no cultural education
a little cultural education
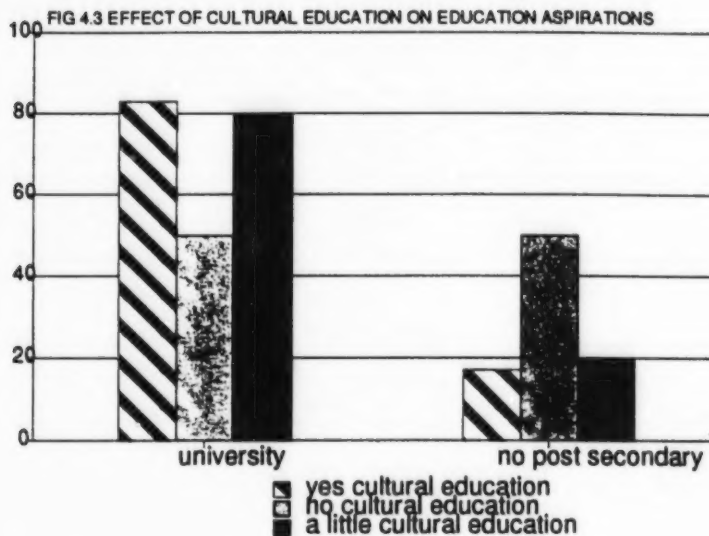
Here, unlike the elementary students, cultural education has a positive influence on aspirations for higher education. More than 80% of those students in cultural education programs (either some or a little) in high school want to go to university compared to 50% not enroled in such programs. Although the numbers of high school students here are small, there is some indication that the satisfaction that students feel with cultural education programs contributes to a desire for higher learning. That this is not the case for elementary students suggests that students, with some balance of cultural and more traditional academic orientations, will develop a focus over time.

Lastly, in this section we look at the effect that cultural education has on dropout rates for the high school students in our sample.

FIG 4.4 THE EFFECT OF CULTURAL EDUCATION ON SCHOOL DROP OUT

Bar chart showing values from 0 to 80 on the y-axis, with two categories on the x-axis: "have dropped out" and "never dropped out". Legend: yes cultural education, no cultural education, a little cultural education.

Quite clearly, the results illustrate that cultural education is indeed associated with the likelihood that students will stay in school. For example, only 75.5% of students with cultural education have dropped out of school at least once compared to 50% with no cultural training and 78% with little cultural training. It is difficult to establish definitely the causal connection between the two variables but it is defensible to conclude that cultural training has a positive influence on students staying in school.

The talking circles revealed some interesting corroborative findings with respect to cultural education. The students unanimously agree that the teaching of elders are as important to their lives and their successes as the teaching in the formal curriculum. The importance of the teaching and guidance of elders was endorsed by the talking circle that suggested that elder guidance accomplishes two fundamentally important things: because it is based on lifelong learning, it promotes a belief system that learning is a continual process; and, because elders guide and allow the student to find his/her own values, they encourage one to "search for knowledge rather than to just accept it." Their argument is that elders teach based on the premise that knowledge comes from within rather than from the outside. They indicate that this

FIG 4.4 THE EFFECT OF CULTURAL EDUCATION ON SCHOOL DROP OUT

have dropped out   never dropped out

■ yes cultural education
▨ no cultural education
■ a little cultural education

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passion for learning that is instilled by Elder instruction has a positive effect on the will to seek further education.

When asked the specific things that elders could bring to the formal school system, the students produced the following litany of skills:

- communication	- heritage
- listening	- respect
- history	- self-discipline
- patience	- brotherhood
- basic understanding	- friendships
- acceptance of oneself	- pride
- higher self-esteem	- self-discovery
- thankfulness	- obedience
- awareness	- faith

In addition, students discussed the principle of "cleanliness" that framed the teachings of elders. It is significant that the concept of spiritual and cultural cleanliness is tied to what conventional society might define as cognitive cleanliness, whereby respect for culture and self are the infrastructures upon which learning is based.

4.5 ADDITIONAL FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES

Two items appear consistently in the interview and talking circle discussions with high school students: the issue of time and its impact on school success, and pregnancy and childcare. On the first issue, over half the students talked about the issue of lateness and how it influenced their time in school. One unsuccessful student related this rather typical experience:

[What was it that you didn't like about there?] Teachers.
[What about the teachers didn't you like?] Because I always got kicked out.
[What would they kick you out for?] Talking to people, my homework being late, late for school. I have a problem with being late for school.

Another student's lament illustrates how teacher-student relationships are coloured by time

constraints:

> I didn't get along with quite a few of the teachers here. I'm late a lot, that's one of my main problems but I always pass in all my classes. But, I still got held back.

A student with similar concerns suggested that:

> I would change the times in school. I have trouble getting up. I've been getting up lately but before that's why I was held back because I was late. They are thinking of doing that around here, like starting at 11:00 and ending at 6:30.

The issue of lateness is also discussed by some students in the context of cultural bias:

> How they kick out students. They want us to go to school but then they kick us out. Last year I was thrown out of school every second time I was late. After a while I just said I didn't want to go to school anymore and I never went. I actually wouldn't kick students out of school for being late but for causing trouble like fighting. Because nowadays you see mostly Aboriginal students getting kicked out of school and it makes us look like we don't want to learn when that's not true because I've always loved to learn.

> Lateness and time constraints are linked to the second problem we discuss in this

section, that of child care.

> [What is it that you find difficult or hard about school?] .
> Trying to get here because I'm a parent, a single parent and sometimes my son gets sick and I have to miss and it's the work like it's two hour long classes that I have to miss, and I fall behind and I can never get back, I just keep falling behind.

Another student discussed how the particular day care program in the alternative school in which

she was registered improved the quality of her education and her life:

> I remember when my son was really young, it was really hard to find daycare facilities but now I don't think is as bad. With the centre in the school it really helped me find good babysitters, like good quality babysitters.

This same students discussed why school-based daycare centres are substantially better than

community-based daycares:

> a lot of these daycare homes they want you to pick up your child right after school and that's kinda hard to make the transition. First, you're at school and have all this work to do, and then pick up your kid, take the bus, the bus is horrible but that's a whole other story.

> This last experience frames the importance of school for not only providing the physical

day care facility, but in also providing parenting skills and the encouragement of parenting as

something that can enhance learning and happiness. One older student revealed in the talking

circles how she is a mother of a five-year old and had a previous substance abuse problem.

Before coming to the alternative school, she had found parenting a burden and had never, as a

result, "played with her child"--she had never actually taken her child to a playground. After spending time in the alternative program, she had learned the skills to enjoy time with her child and found that to be the most rewarding part of her life. She indicated that, as a result, her substance abuse problem was under control and the newfound happiness with her child had dramatically increased her happiness and success in school.

4.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

The research findings presented in this chapter demonstrate that Aboriginal youth in Saskatchewan schools have definite views about their schooling experiences and educational plans. In contrast to characteristic perceptions of an uneasy relationship between Aboriginal people and schools, our research findings indicate that Indian and Métis students in both elementary and high schools have generally positive assessments of their education and have adopted a serious orientation to learning and future aspirations. They tend to enjoy learning, particularly in selected subject areas, they frequently have good relationships with their teachers, and they value friendships and cultural aspects of schooling. They also express relatively ambitious educational and career aspirations that suggest a long-term commitment to education.

The Aboriginal students we surveyed indicate, as well, a high degree of awareness of social, economic and historical factors that influence their schooling. They see their prospects for educational success affected by problems within and outside of schools. In school, while most students report having had access to Aboriginal cultural programming and Aboriginal teachers, such exposure is often limited in nature, relegated to specific subject areas or time periods apart from mainstream programming. Students also express some concerns about intolerant teachers, inconsistent disciplinary standards, inflexible time arrangements, and problems with certain subjects (science and math are most frequently cited, but the latter is identified by other students as an area that they like) that stand as barriers to their learning prospects. More generally, they identify issues like racism, prejudice, poverty, violence, and unemployment as factors that may intervene into their lives in such a way as to affect their prospects for educational success. By contrast, they value teachers and programming that are

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sensitive to their cultures. In each of these regards, their positive commitment to and assessment of schooling are enhanced when respect and cultural understanding are integrated into their educational environments. Their motivation to succeed is driven to a large extent by a combination of respect for their elders and individual strength and development.

CHAPTER 5 - CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 RESEARCH SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This report has examined several dimensions of Aboriginal students' experiences in Saskatchewan schools, with particular emphasis on how the students perceive schooling and other factors that influence their chances for educational success. The research has been concerned to address three main research questions, outlined below with summary research findings:

1. What factors do Indian and Métis students identify as the strengths and limitations of their schooling?

The Indian and Métis students surveyed in our research highlight several strengths and limitations in their schooling experiences. Most notably, the students offer, overall, a positive assessment of their schools both in general and with respect to more specific dimensions of their education. There are encouraging signs insofar as high proportions of students indicate that they have had exposure to Aboriginal teachers and, to a lesser extent, to programs and cultural activities related to their heritage. It is apparent, however, that Aboriginal personnel and curricula are not as centrally integrated into provincial schools and school programming as student demand would warrant. Elementary and high students find that their teachers, with a few exceptions, facilitate their learning and are accessible and approachable. The students also convey a strong orientation to learning and a desire to succeed in conventional terms. The students' responses to specific questions and their discussions in talking circles indicate their concurrence with the dominant public sentiment which places a high value on education and its importance for future life opportunities. They are motivated by a desire to extend their education into post-secondary studies and seek professional and vocational careers that require advanced educational credentials. These motivations are reinforced through respect for elders and a drive to demonstrate personal empowerment.

Like other students, Aboriginal students indicate that they have some difficulty with regular features of school such as particular subjects, school rules, homework, discipline,

exams, and interactions with selected teachers, although none of these is posed as a serious limitation to learning. The barriers and limitations that emerge in a more pronounced way tend to be related to specific dimensions of Indian and Métis experience. Racism, prejudice and discrimination appear frequently as important considerations in student accounts of their relations with teachers, other students, and people outside of school. Whether these factors constitute part of students' individual encounters or are transmitted to them through the lives and stories of those close to them, they correspond to the sense of vulnerability and discomfort that Aboriginal people feel with mainstream educational institutions, as conveyed in much of the literature cited in Chapter 2 of this report. By contrast, those students who report that their schools are more sensitive to Aboriginal students and their cultures, especially in the alternative school setting surveyed in our research, indicate greater degrees of comfort and engagement in the schooling process.

2. How relevant is schooling, according to the perceptions of Indian and Métis students, to their out-of-school experiences and aspirations?

The students we surveyed report that their schooling exhibits some sensitivity to Aboriginal content, and they view education as important to their futures. As indicated above, they value education and have little inclination to modify many of the central features of current education systems. These findings seem to contradict the theme of cultural dislocation that is conveyed in much of the literature on Aboriginal people's historical relationships with the education system, but they are consistent with the search by Indian and Métis communities for meaningful participation and decision-making roles in education. In these respects, the students convey a desire to have access to quality education, meet educational standards and pursue futures that require high levels of educational attainment, but they report the greatest satisfaction and confidence when their schooling is supported by respect for their cultural heritage and circumstances.

Culture must be understood here as a complex and changing phenomenon. In a limited sense, cultural teaching is reported in various forms through instruction in Native languages, Native studies courses, traditional stories, spirituality, and involvement by elders and Aboriginal

teachers in schooling. Aboriginal students value the inclusion of these factors in the school system, but they feel that even greater steps must be taken to accommodate fully their cultural needs. More broadly, culture also refers to the ongoing social and economic conditions that characterize students' lives, including the legacy of past traditions and more recent experiences. Schooling's relevance in this regard depends upon its ability to incorporate sensitivity to life experience in a holistic manner.

3. What is the relationship between these student perceptions and various social factors in and out of school?

Among the issues that inform their realities, as related by many students who participated in our research, are racism, discrimination, poverty, violence and abuse, housing problems, parenting and domestic relations, and unemployment. While these problems are not universally experienced, or shared to the same extent, student sensitivity to their importance indicates a need for educators and school officials to remain vigilant to the context within which schools operate and to the needs, beyond standard curricular concerns, that students bring with them into the classroom. Aboriginal students want to do well, and have high aspirations that require educational success, but they face continual reminders that their participation in schools may often be somewhat fragile as they are confronted with situations at home, in their communities, and at school that may lead to lowered performance and expectations, withdrawal, or failure. It is noteworthy, for instance, that few of the students aspire to occupations as general labourers or employees, or to futures out of school that are even more restricted, despite statistical projections and trends which suggest a much harsher reality for large proportions of the Aboriginal population.

Overall, our research suggests that educational attainment and success among Aboriginal students can be enhanced when schools embrace programs, practices and personnel that are informed by a combination of conventional and Aboriginal-specific sensitivities. Students desire achievement and seek futures determined by conventional standards, but they also seek grounding in their cultural traditions and practices in such a way that they can operate successfully in two, hopefully integrated, worlds.

5.2 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This research has sought to express the opinions of Aboriginal children and youth with respect to their school experiences and their understandings of what constitutes a desirable school environment. Based on their singular and collective sentiments, we present the following policy implications with respect to the social, cultural and educational needs of students. These recommendations go beyond curricular changes and address larger issues of well-being, school governance, and physical and emotional safety.

RECOMMENDATION 1. Racism and Discrimination

While schools may have zero-tolerance policies on racism and discrimination, we recommend that the policies be publicized on an ongoing basis. The alternative high school in which the talking circles in our research were conducted, made a concerted effort to incorporate problems of intolerance and discrimination into its curriculum and into regular talking circles. The students in this setting are constantly reminded of how racism and discrimination, in overt and subtle ways, steal into everyone's life inside and outside school. Furthermore, the teachers constantly discuss how issues of discrimination are to be handled. The constant reminders for staff and students create an ongoing awareness of how prejudice and racism damage individuals. Given the recurrences of these problems as reported by students in our research, our recommendation emphasizes the importance of not letting the issues die at the formal zero-tolerance policy level. Without becoming an institution of policing, schools must visit issues of discrimination on a continual but sensitive basis among all staff and students.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Time Flexibility

Given that many students express how time commitments outside the school make it difficult to meet the time requirements of attendance and assignments in school, we recommend that both alternative and mainstream schools deal with lateness in a less punitive way than has been practiced in the past. Moreover, where possible, schools should adjust the time

requirements based on individual need and the exigencies of the lives of the students outside school. Too often, students leave school or are asked to leave based on their inability or unwillingness to meet rigidly inposed time requirements of the formal school curriculum.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Cultural Education and Language

The students who feel the safest, the most comfortable, and the most enthused are those who had received some form of cultural education in school. Whether cultural studies are a validation of the cultural lives of the students or whether they engender pride and interest in community, they seem to foster individual empowerment. We recommend that schools be highly sensitive to the cultural make up of their students and promote appropriate multi-cultural education as fundamental to learning. Furthermore, language training is fundamental to personal empowerment through cultural education. The students in our research express a rather consistent sentiment that traditional languages should be given credence at least equal to the two charter languages in Canada. We concur with this position and recommend that Aboriginal language training become part of a mainstream school curriculum in Saskatchewan schools. We recommend, in addition, that Aboriginal children in mainstream and alternative schools have access to Elders for cultural and personal training. Students often express the importance of Elders in helping them get and maintain a sense of balance inside and outside of school and we contend that training by Elders will greatly enhance the acquisition of education both formally and informally. In these regards, we recommend that both Aboriginal language training and instruction by Elders be available to non-Aboriginal students where possible in an overall program based on sensitivity to culture and age.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Social and Economic Sensitivity

Students' sensitivity to the problems of poverty, abuse, violence and parenting illustrates how profoundly socio-economic problems affect the emotional as well as the physical lives of students. The students in our research indicate amazingly high levels of educational aspirations. The likelihood of reaching those aspirations is based, in part, on experiences

outside school. For many students in our research, the balance between success and failure is delicate. Schools need to address the familial and community exigencies of the students in the programming and services they offer. This is a difficult task. A responsive policy, nonetheless, must involve tolerance and understanding for individual misconduct that results from life circumstances, and must demonstrate schools' commitment to rectify damaging conditions. Several alternative high schools and community schools, for example, have breakfast and lunch programs that meet the immediate needs of the students. In addition, two alternative schools incorporate parenthood training and drug abuse counseling as part of the life skills program. These programs, while somewhat specific to certain populations, indicate that the lived experiences of students can be incorporated into a holistic learning context.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Teacher Quality

Good teachers dramatically enhance the enthusiasm of students for learning and poor teachers dramatically damage that enthusiasm. Our concern is that the damage that an insensitive and intolerant teacher does outweighs the benefits that most good teachers generate. It is our recommendation that schools and school boards--especially in Aboriginal communities but not exclusive to such communities--take care to foster positive teaching especially amongst those teachers who are indifferent or cynical. Since students (and often their teachers) know full well the teachers that create a negative atmosphere their input should be sought in discussions of staffing needs. Admittedly, this is a sensitive and complex issue. However, since our research has uncovered the overwhelming damage that one indifferent or aggressive teacher can do, we feel compelled to offer this as an integral education and human rights issue.

In this regard, it should be stressed that while cultural sensitivity is fundamental to positive teaching, being of Aboriginal ancestry is not a necessary condition for cultural sensitivity.

RECOMMENDATION 6: Educational Aspirations

Our research finds that both elementary and high school students indicate an overwhelming desire to attend some post-secondary educational institution, especially University. We are also aware that such high aspirations often do not translate into reality, especially for Northern Aboriginal students. We recommend, therefore, that all schools, but especially isolated rural and northern schools, focus on helping students understand the reality of post-secondary education by offering, on an ongoing basis, information on: (a) funding potential; (b) the educational requirements of post-secondary institutions, including programs for Aboriginal students; (c) the social reality of University and College life for Aboriginal students; and (d) the reality of moving from rural to urban areas.

The other basic recommendation involves a more long term initiative regarding long distance post-secondary education. We maintain that the high aspirations of the students would be fostered by some mechanism of decentralized learning that would provide education to the more isolated areas in the province. As it stands, post-secondary education occurs in largely urban contexts and rural and northern students are disadvantaged as a result. In all of these recommendations, we reiterate the by now familiar refrain that Aboriginal communities be fully involved in all aspects of educational decision-making and schooling practice.

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PROTOCOL AND RESEARCHER EXPERIENCES AND REFLECTIONS

To fulfill the expectations of this research project, requests for participation were sent out to the Saskatchewan Board of Education, Saskatoon Catholic Board of Education, the Northern Lights School Division, Prince Albert School Division, Qu'Appelle School Division, and the North Battleford School Division. The responses received were very mixed with regards to cooperativeness and a willingness to participate. Following is an overview of the researchers' impression of the schools that were contacted and those in which interviews were conducted.

Elementary School I

This was the first school contacted in the research project. It was chosen on the basis of being a comparative school due to its low ratio of Aboriginal students. The principal was very cooperative and interested in this research project. The first meeting comprised of reviewing the intent of the research project, the students to be targeted, and how to best conduct the interviews. The principal was open to suggestions from the researchers as to the best way to gain access to the students to be interviewed.

Within the week, arrangements were made for the students to be interviewed. The teachers from Grade 3 and 6 classrooms were notified and the students were called from their classrooms. As each was interviewed they returned to their classroom and sent the next student. The principal provided a vacant room for the interviews to be conducted. Both the teachers and the principal were very cooperative in assisting with the research project.

High School I

Contact was made with the principal, who felt it would be best to make arrangements with the instructor who has instructed the Native Studies course in previous years. Although the school appeared to be helpful, cooperative and willing to participate in the research project, the process of gaining access to students was decided on by the instructor. This put the school very much in control of the whole process.

The researchers and the instructor discussed a variety of ways to do this, i.e. posters detailing the research or class lists from which to call the students. It was agreed that the instructor would talk to the students themselves first, followed by an information meeting with the researchers and those willing to participate. Again, this school was chosen on the basis of being a comparative school due to the low Aboriginal student ratio.

A date was set up for the information meeting that the researchers would conduct with the instructor present. Students were informed of the time and place of the meeting by the instructor. The turn out was very poor with only one student attending who was unsure as to whether or not he wanted to participate. A more aggressive approach of calling students from their classrooms was discussed. The instructor, however, appeared to be apprehensive about this type of approach. This school was not selected for interviews as a result of the perceived uneasiness and lack of interest from the students.

Elementary School II

The principal was accommodating by allowing the researchers to take the initiative on the best way to proceed with conducting the interviews. After a discussion of the intent of the research project and the students to be targeted, the principal provided two rooms/ areas for the interviews to be conducted in, and left the process for interviewing the students in the hands of the researchers. Each student was called by the researchers and walked back to his/ her class. The basic feeling received from the students after the interviews was that they did not understand what the research was about (i.e., what "community" was, how they fit into it, or the difference between them and the general population).

The teachers themselves were friendly and open to discussion with the researchers during lunch hour and coffee breaks. It is felt that the ease of entering this school is a result of prior knowledge and contact with the principal by one of the researchers. We had intended to interview participants in the Adult Learning Centre, but at that time they were preparing for GED exams.

High School II

The principal was very excited about the research project itself, and was willing to discuss the numerous changes that the school had made regarding the all-encompassing approach to the various needs of the students. Arrangements were made to discuss the project and the process with an Elder who was the "Stay in School" coordinator.

The elder provided names of the students she felt would be interested in participating in the research project. In scheduling the interviews, the Elder was open and accommodating to the schedule of both the students and researcher. A room to conduct the interviews in was also provided by the school. A list of students was given to the secretary who in turn called them to the office where they were met by the researcher. Upon completion of the interview, they walked back to the main hallway.

Regina School Division

Entry into these schools was denied on the basis that the guidelines as set out for conducting research in their area were not met. These guidelines were not expanded upon as to which area was not met, nor was there any suggestion as to how to proceed. It is the opinion of the researchers that the anonymity of the students was of concern, yet all school divisions received the same requests. This school division, therefore, was not approached.

Qu'Appelle School Division

No responses were received from this school division. Numerous call were placed to arrange a meeting, with no responses received.

North Battleford School Division

Again, there was no response from this school division.

Northern Lights School Division

The director had just taken over the position in the Fall of 1997. In talking to him on the

phone, he did not see a problem with the research problem as set out in the information package sent to him. The final decision to participate, however, would be made at the next monthly board meeting.

Contact by phone was made after the meeting, and the director expressed concerns raised by board members over some of the questions which dealt with community concerns (i.e. alcohol/ drug abuse, and family abuse issues). It was expressed that these were guidelines only, and that the students could choose whether or not to discuss these issues. Concern was also raised over not having a guidance counselor available should any of the questions bring up personal issues for the students. The director was informed that Elders are legitimate counselors. A letter received from the director stated that access for this research project was denied due to the number of research projects already underway, suggesting that they be contacted next semester.

When this was done, the director stated that he felt that the project would be approved and informed the researcher to make plans to go ahead. Confirmation of the schools that would be contacted was discussed with the director. The researcher contacted two schools. Both schools were receptive to the research project pending approval of the study which would be brought at the time of the interviews. Tentative dates were arranged for the interviews to be conducted. The researcher, in anticipation of approval, made travel arrangements and booked accommodation at each district locale.

The morning of departure for the researcher, the director was contacted to confirm entry into the school division. At this time, the director was quite upset that contact was made with the schools when no permission had been granted. The researcher refreshed the director's memory that he had told the researcher to go ahead and make arrangements, and said that it was perceived by the researcher that permission was granted to inform the schools to be entered. The director informed the researcher that the board did not give approval for the research to be conducted, and that he would talk to a principal investigator regarding this matter. The director also suggested to perhaps try again in the next school year.

High School II

Immediately upon entering this school, we could sense a very relaxed and informal atmosphere. Both students and teachers were receptive, listening intently to what was being said. If they did not understand, they would ask for clarification. Even though there were a couple of students who were very vocal, each student was given the opportunity to either pass or talk during the talking circle. Each student spoke to the researchers, and provided important information and ideals as to what does and does not work in the mainstream school setting.

After the talking circle, the researchers were invited to stay for lunch. Students and teachers discussed general issues with the researchers on a more informal basis. It was found to be a time to test the researchers in their life situations (i.e., testing one of the researchers on her ability to speak Cree). The principal expressed the view that the large size of classrooms in mainstream schools does not allow for the closeness or individuality of the students to be considered.

Elementary School III

The principal welcomed the researchers and provided a tour of the school, as well as introductions to the teachers whose students would be interviewed. During the tour and discussion of the research project, the principal made a comment to one of the classrooms that the reason for this research must be that the Board of Education has some extra money.

The scheduled day for the interviews happened to be the school's "Cultural Awareness Day." The students participated in various activities that had an Aboriginal component to them (i.e., storytellers, crafts, and talking circles). The person scheduled to conduct the talking circles was not able to make it, and the school asked if the researchers would fulfill this component. We agreed to do this in the morning, and start interviews in the afternoon. The Cultural awareness activities were scheduled for the morning and recreational activities were scheduled for some grades in the afternoon.

High School III

The principal welcomed the researchers and discussed with them the best approach for gaining access to students. She talked with the students and introduced the researcher to them. A room was set up and each student was asked if they minded being tape recorded. They were also informed that participation was strictly voluntary. All students participated in the interviews.

All of the students had voluntarily enrolled in the school. Many not only attended school, but had families and jobs as well. All students were both open in their discussion and inquisitive about the project.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Themes

1. Identity

> Who is Aboriginal in your family?
>> Father
>> Mother
>> Grandparents on Father's side
>> Grandparents on Mother's side

> Are You:
>> Métis
>> First Nation? If yes, which one?
>> Non-Status
>> Inuit

2. Language
> Does anyone in your home speak an Aboriginal language? If yes, which one?
> Do you speak an Aboriginal language?
> What Aboriginal language do you speak and/or understand?
> Can you write an Aboriginal language?
> Who taught you to speak an Aboriginal language?

3. School
> What do you like about school?
> What is difficult about school?
> Are their Aboriginal teachers in your school?
> What are you taught about Aboriginal culture?
> Do you want to continue with school?
> Do you want to go to school at a technical college, university, trade school?
> What do you not like about your school? i.e. Other teachers, students, etc.?

> What do you think are some barriers to learning?
>> poverty conditions
>> unemployment
>> housing
>> abuse related issues
>> difficulty in learning - do not like to be in school
>> racism
>> schools do not teach about Aboriginal culture
>> teachers are not open to talking to you

4. Social Issues

What do you think are some problems for Aboriginal people in your community:

suicide
unemployment
housing
family violence
abuse issues
addictions
racism
youth recreation
programming
day care
not enough to do

5. Work related activities:

What do your parents do for a living?
What types of work do people do in your community - hunting, trapping, crafts, business, school, band office, health worker, counselor, Chief, government, social workers?
What kind of job would you like to have in the future?

The Recruitment and Retention of Aboriginal Teachers in Saskatchewan Schools. James McNinch for the SSTA Research Centre.

Equity is perceived as part of the problem because it confuses the issue of competency with affirmative action and quotas. Many Aboriginal teachers believe this has weakened their position in the profession.

. . .there is still a perception that we are hired simply because we are Aboriginal whether we are highly qualified or not. (pg 23)

The concept of a multi-cultural perspective where Aboriginal people are regarded as one segment of a diverse school population, rejects the concept of special status in that diversity.

. . . Perhaps we should focus on working and living together rather than just focus(ing) on Native ancestry. Everyone is important – let's work on protecting and improving that.

Most Aboriginal teachers understand that they are assets because of special skills they have which will benefit all students in the school system. Still others are quick to point out that sometimes expectations are unreasonably high or at least they feel that they are:

. . . there are unwritten expectations of our Aboriginal teaching staff. They are not only required to provide for instruction of their students, but be role models, which means there is additional pressure to lead positive lifestyles. They often feel their lives are constantly being observed. As well, they must also be specialists in the areas of Aboriginal history, language, culture, traditions, arts, etc. In some instances Aboriginal staff are also asked to provide cross-cultural workshops when really this is not an expectation of non-Aboriginal staff.